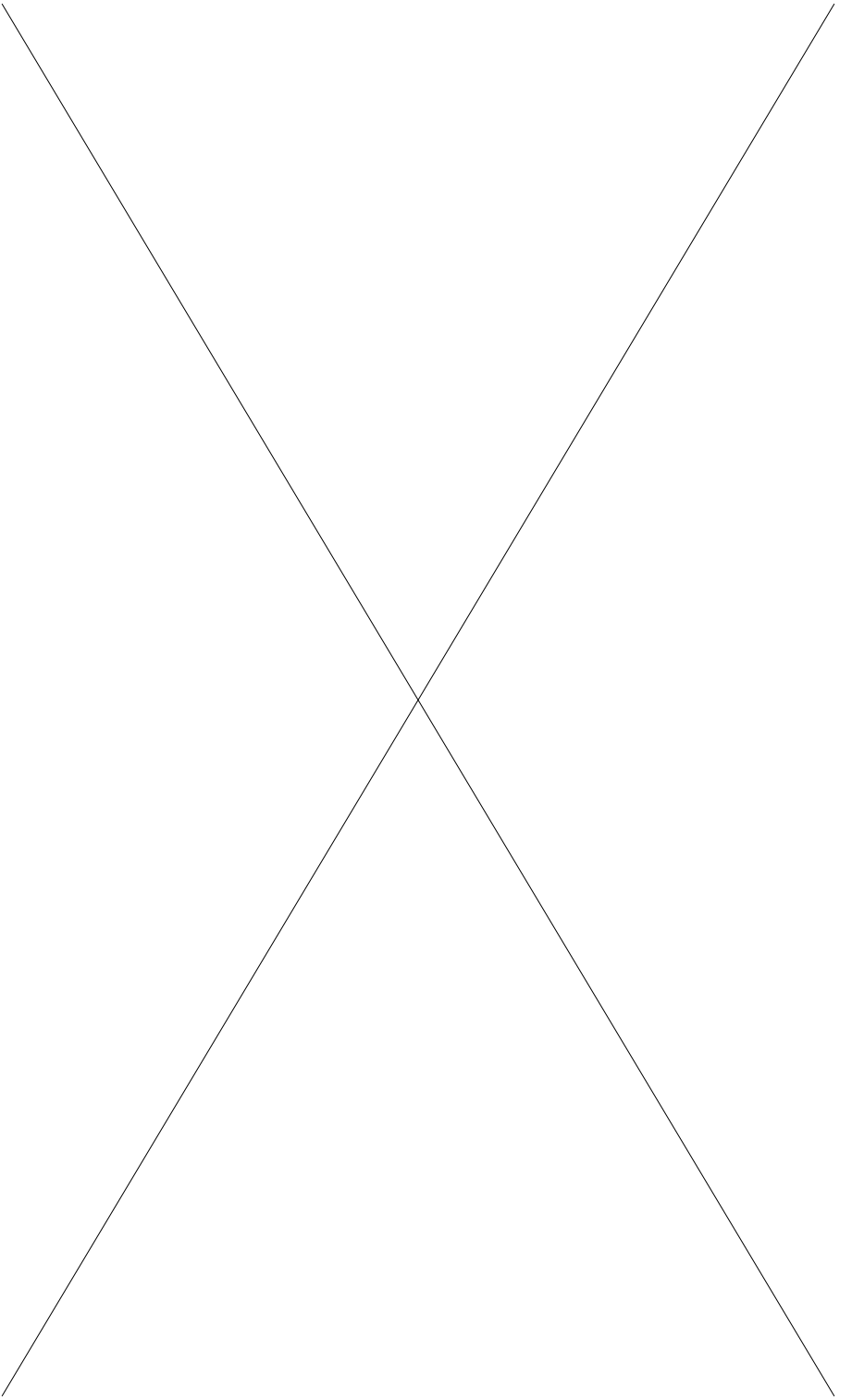
# CONVERSATIONS WITH ANNA GREENSPAN & NICK LAND



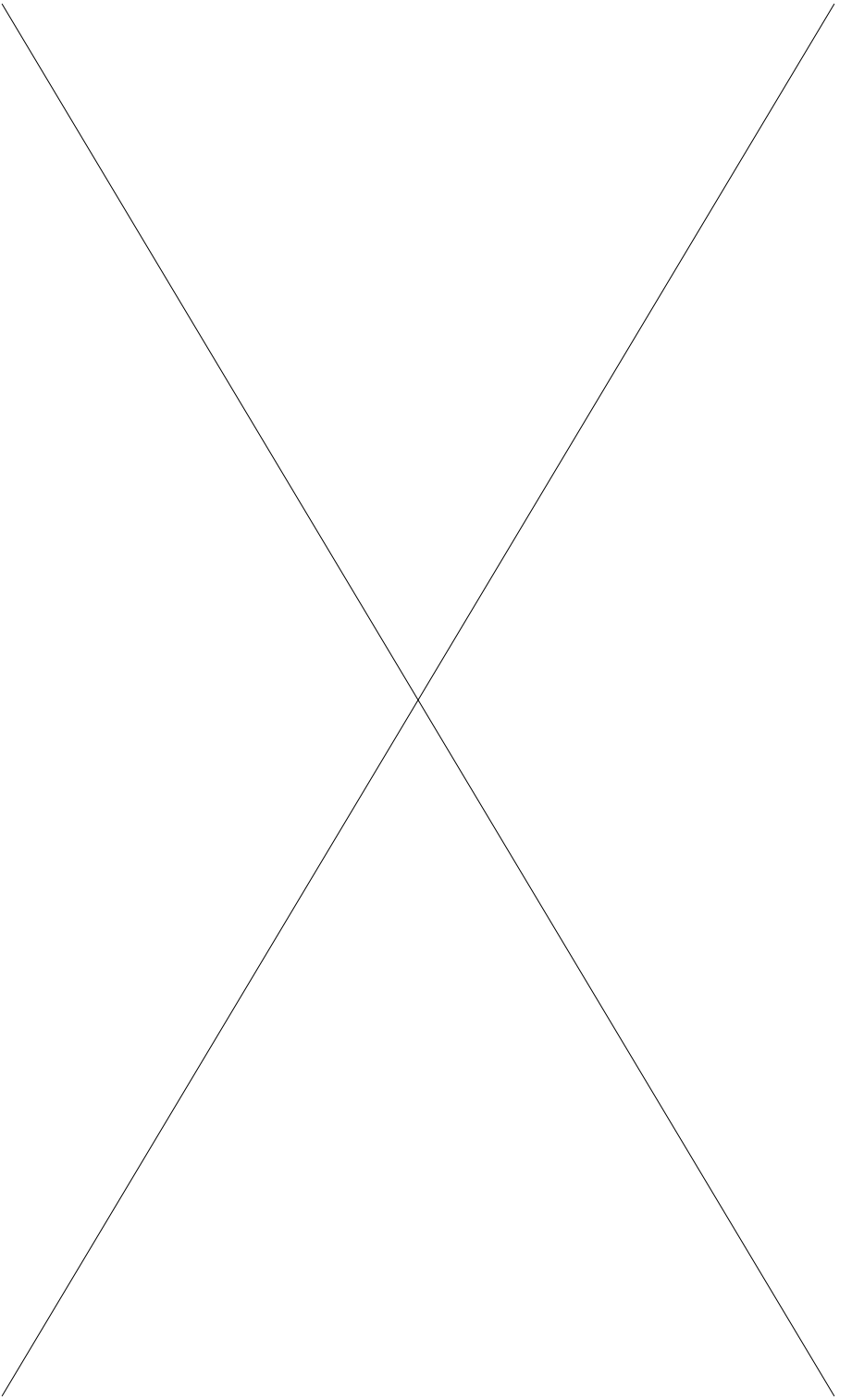
*– But, good heavens, we know nothing about the future!*
*– No, but there is a thing or two to be said about it all the same.*
**Henrik Ibsen**

*We have reached a period where evolutionary history ceases to make sense unless we understand it in reverse … There is no way out, no sideways, no backward; what matters, rather, is to increase the force and speed of the processes by which we have been gripped.*
**Ernst Jünger**

*Everyone that walks through a city at night walks in the present, while everyone who walks through a city during the day walks in the past or the future.*
**Giacinto Scelsi**

*Capital burns off the nuance in a culture.*
**Don DeLillo**

*Money is becoming very esoteric. All waves and codes. A higher kind of intelligence. Travels at the speed of light.*
**Don DeLillo**



# ZONES OF EXPERIMENTATION

**Mikkel Bindslev** **A few words to introduce you, Anna.**

**You were involved with the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (Ccru) along with, amongst others, Sadie Plant, Nick Land, Mark Fisher, Steve Goodman, Suzanne Livingston and Luciana Parisi. In your PhD, *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine* (2000), you argue that the nature of time is not some eternal given that has descended from above but a process that is itself continuously under production. Through a meticulous analysis of Kant's transcendental philosophy, the history of mechanical methods of time keeping and the philosophy of time in Deleuze and Guattari's A 1000 *Plateaus*, you show that mutations or radical discontinuities in the thought of time and the material practice of time follow from both the Kantian and the capitalist revolution. You conclude that to overcome discontinuity it is necessary to explore singular events without distinguishing between time and that which occurs in time. Your example is the anticlimax of Y2K.**

**In the early new millennium, you relocated to Shanghai and have since published a book entitled *Shanghai Future: Modernity Remade* (2014). It's described as a book on the foldings of time, spirals, things turned inside out, empty spaces, mirages, densities, and endless subdivisions of space in Shanghai, all of which act as catalysts for Chinese neomodernity. Most importantly, the book introduces the time spiral as a temporal model for understanding Chinese neomodernity. On a more general level, I think *Shanghai Future* is concerned with the conditions for the emergence of the new in the early 21st century. You contrast two models: Modernity 1.0, the 20th-century modernist model of top-down**

planning, where the new is built from scratch, and Modernity 2.0 or neomodernity, where top-down planning encounters various disturbances, various turbulences in the process, and the new emerges from a mixed state rather than from a clean slate. At the same time, there is a bottom-up growth from the already mixed state of street life which already affected and disturbed Modernity 1.0. Then you develop, as I understand it, a similar model for capitalism and the creative potential of economic order and disorder: on the one hand there is top-down planning and regulation, monopolies, big business; on the other hand there are the small markets, the grey economy functioning at an intermediate level between the illegal black market of crime and corporate economy, grassroots financing, and the shanzhai economy with its production of disruptive technology that combines piracy with improvement and innovation. As you explain, the most important vector in mapping the Asian megacity is not the density of the population but the intensity of economic transactions, and in Asian megacities that intensity is located at the bottom levels.

Now, where is the time spiral localized in this? Is it the mixed state, the turbulence, the disturbances, or are there rather two simultaneous time spirals: the passive result of disturbances and the active force of the experimental social body found at street level? Is there actually a vortex of small and large time spirals?

Anna Greenspan Probably the easiest and most general way to get at the time spiral idea is just as an attempt to escape the dichotomy between a stereotypical conception of Western temporality, based on the modernist notion of a straight-line progressive time, and the stereotypical Chinese mode of temporality, which is based on the cyclical mode. Both these stereotypes are oversimplified, of course. It is not the case that China doesn't have its own cultures and traditions of linear time (in ancestor worship and genealogical lineages, for example.) Yet, though there are all sorts of ways in which China manifests linear time, there is still a strong sense in which it, in certain ways, favours the cyclical idea. At least that's the way both Western thinkers like Marx and Hegel thought about China, and also Chinese thinkers in the May 4th movement that wanted to disrupt China's own processes and criticize the way China kept being entwined in these repeating cycles. So the spiral is something that is able to describe these things, without being caught on either side. I guess part of your question is where does planning belong. My initial thought is that the disruptions are what helps produce the spiral. Something has to be sort of pushed off kilter in order for it to not just be in a kind of repeating loop forever. So maybe that is one way of thinking about this, that these disturbances produce the spiral. But you know, you write a book, and then it takes a long time to come out and then, by the time it comes out you've sort of forgotten it. You have moved along with time. The thing I'm working on now has to do with time waves. So this conversation is a good occasion to really think

about how that might feed into the idea of the time spiral. It's a similar sort of thought, of trying to disrupt that kind of straight line of time. It's based on another kind of Chinese temporal orientation, which seems to be towards this rise and fall of time.

**MB** Is the time spiral meant to change our perception of China?

**AG** No, I don't think so. I'm more interested in trying to think about the future and it's just that China happens to be at the cusp of the future. I certainly think at this moment it's really crucial to engage with China and its material productions and also its intellectual history. If you're interested, as I am, in thinking about the future I think you have to engage with China. China is obviously playing a pretty key role at the moment. It's too big to ignore. So part of it gets into questions like, 'how do we think about Chinese Modernity.' But for me those kinds of questions are subordinate to the larger question: What can this engagement with China tell us? What does it unlock, in terms of thinking about processes of change and about the future and about time?

**MB** In the book you state that Chinese neomodernity forces us to rewrite or re-evaluate Western ideas about modernity.

**AG** Obviously there is a very strong kind of planning, a very familiar sort of planning story that's taking place in Shanghai. It's not like that doesn't exist here. And since I wrote the book that force has become even stronger. But I still think the basic premise of it is correct. What we are seeing unfold here is something quite different. Though it might have these familiar strains, it's not like we've seen all this before. What's your interest in this?

**MB** Well, I come from archaeology, so it is natural for me to think about how to bring the distant past and thought closer together, how to establish links between material culture and abstract thought. To me, your work is an encouragement to search for such links in new, inventive ways.

**AG** The intimate connection between past and future is obvious in the Chinese case because the oracle bones are a foundational archaeological finding and because the I-Ching is such an important foundational text. In both of these interrelated examples there is a very strong sense of a deep time that is already disturbed. The past was already really disrupted. I definitely think that's the case, and I think that the importance of the I-Ching can't be overstated. This idea of time waves, which as I said I'm working on now, is really immersed in a modern take up of the I-Ching. That the past is already about the future is something quite significant and interesting.

**MB** **The idea of the time spiral seems to mark a new concern for the past in yours and Nick's work; if it's not exactly mentioned for the first time, then it is certainly more pronounced than before. It seems like a culmination of previous different attempts to break with linear time models, for instance in the Ccru.**

**AG** **The Ccru was certainly interested in ideas of deep time.**

**MB** **All the Ccru work on the deep past and geotrauma is about the inhuman past. The historical past seems to have gained more importance both in your own and in Nick's more recent work.**

**AG** **Probably a part of it has to do with the engagement with intellectual history. When you're engaged as a Westerner with Western intellectual history you're assuming a certain past without it really being explicit. Whatever philosophy you're interested in is in a conversation with its own past automatically. So there may be something just about trying to engage with another tradition that you're not as familiar with. You recognize that there's this long conversation that you have to dive into straight away. For example, in my current work I'm trying to engage with these modern Chinese philosophers. There's no way of doing that without understanding how they themselves are engaging with their own intellectual history and speaking through this intellectual history. Maybe it's true that Ccru was interested in this cataclysmic idea of deep time or geotrauma but not necessarily in history. I don't know, I would have to think more about that.**

**MB** **I detect much more sympathy, if that word isn't too subjective or emotional, for the grey economy of Shanghai as a force of neomodernity than for the visible signs of growth: the visually attractive architecture. The implication, as I understand it, is that the actual historical forces don't attract attention. They are invisible, they are working in the shadows, they are elusive and actually thrive in partial or full shade.**

**AG** **For me this idea that there are these separate forces emerged from a lot of Ccru-based discussions, which came out of DeLanda and Braudel. To me the dichotomy that Braudel presents is really crucial: capitalism as distinct from, but coexisting with the economy of the markets. The dichotomy between large companies married to the state, and the street market bottom-up economy, seems very much alive. The distinction is very visible in the Asian metropolis, sometimes painfully visible. If you explore further around where we just walked, you can see the remains of these street markets and then, just across the street, a gigantic development by one of the biggest and most important real estate developers of Shanghai. You can just watch them coming. You see bulldozers that are like monstrous dinosaurs just ripping up the street and creating new high-end shopping malls and apartment buildings. So**

**that dichotomy in the making of the city of the future is very much alive. After I wrote the book, I did a whole study of street food, which since then has almost completely disappeared in Shanghai. It has pretty much been wiped out in the process of, or in the name of, a kind of 'civilized' Chinese modernity. Nevertheless, there are questions that remain: Are they gone for good? Will they come back and if so in what form? What happens to the people and to the food? It is like a cat and mouse game of suppression and eruption. You don't know how that's going to play out over time. Right now, the forces of suppression and the general formalization of Shanghai have massively increased.**

**MB** **You state, I think it is in the preface, that street food is one of the most essential aspects of city life. Why is that?**

**AG** **Street food is important for all sorts of reasons. First, from the point of view of the producers it's a very easy job for the newly urbanized migrants to the city. In Western cities street food (at least the best street food) is almost always produced by migrants from elsewhere. In China it is internal migrants. Newly arrived migrants sell street food for socio-economic reasons. So it provides employment to the urban poor but it also provides cheap food and this can be especially important for working women. The other crucial thing it does is give life to the street. The street is this critical zone that is neither like a public square nor private like a shopping mall. So it allows for exactly these kinds of disturbances you asked about. Where in a city can you have those disturbances, where is the room for experimentation, for openings? It seems to me that the street is where those things take place. It is why cyberpunk is interested in the street. So street food is crucial for the production of street life. This is why the Party has been so keen on destroying it. It is out of control. It's a zone that's not used to being controlled. To me those dynamics between the formal and the informal are still really critical. It's hard to think about how those things play out in cyber economy.**

**MB** **And what about art? What you write about art is almost all about spaces, such as empty warehouses, that were meant to be very productive areas …**

**AG** **These zones of experimentation have also almost all disappeared.**

**MB** **It sounds like art, potentially, is important for the same reasons as street food.**

**AG** **Yeah, this kind of production of culture. I think that being able to experiment is important. The process of creating the future does not just arrive as a plan from above. It has to emerge through some sort of zones of experimentation. So a place that eliminates all space for exper-**

imentation is highly problematic.

**MB** One impression I got from the book was that empty spaces with no practical use are the zones that attract the future, whereas the high-rise buildings are more illusions of the future.

**AG** I mean, I like high-rise buildings. I think they provoke imagination. They are a part of an urban imaginary. But the problem with them is they don't leave space for play and experimentation. I'm really drawn to follow Jane Jacobs in this regard. I think her idea about play is right. You have to have some sort of undirected play to just see what emerges. If we knew what was emerging, then it wouldn't be a production of the future. For people that are interested in urban life and the built environment, it's really not that hard to have skyscrapers and street life together. I don't know why this is so difficult for people. It just seems to me to be no problem at all. You just allow both of those things to co-exist together. For some reason that seems to be very difficult.

**MB** I went to the Bund the other day, and the skyline really is otherworldly.

**AG** Yes, I love that, that sort of urban imaginary, and obviously some of the main towers are amazing pieces of cultural production. They are just astonishing. I hope there are more of those coming. Part of what I like about them is that wherever you are in the city, they shift. They are these immense sculptural shapeshifters. I also like them because they add life to the street. You can be just walking down the street here or wherever, and there they are, these amazing design features. They absolutely contribute to street life. It just seems obvious to me that you don't have to choose one or the other. I don't know why it always ends up as a choice between one or the other. I don't have some great insight about it. I think it's just simply about crude real estate economics.

**MB** What kind of a relationship do you see between the culture of shadow markets and the practices of the Ccru? The Ccru was also an experiment in creating, if not a place or site, then conditions for the emergence of the new.

**AG** I haven't been there for about eight months, and I know Shenzhen is undergoing some of the same top-down planned development. But in Shenzhen there are still these spaces of really intense street life that are just the closest thing, at least that I have seen, to real cyberpunk, what cyberpunk actually looks and feels like. In that way I think there is a sort of feeding off of similar cultural forces or thoughts. The Ccru was also interested in cyberculture from a perspective that was exterior to the Californian Silicon Valley point of view.

**MB** **If we could speak a bit about the aesthetics of the Ccru writings, which often seem based on rewriting and copying other writers until they lost all individual identity.**

**AG** **We were very into sampling and remixing, and as you know music, jungle in particular, was an enormous influence. Nick and Mark especially were really into this ethos of sampling. Mark was really a genius at it. In that sense, for sure, I think there was a certain plane of experimentation and a question about what it is to sample and remix and allow for the emergence of the new.**

**MB** **And creating something not from a clean slate but by mixing. And that's the same in …**

**AG** **In the shanzhai economy. In the shanzhai economy it's just let's grab stuff from everywhere. Definitely there's a similarity there.**

**MB** **Yet another spiral is the wandering populations of China, the circular flow between their life in the villages and work in Shanghai. In terms of recollection and invention, this mode of living is a spiral, too: they are harvesting from the past, bringing it to the city, they are bringing money and experiences from the city back to the villages and in process modifying both. Rather than the traditional idea about a modern conflict between the mobile life of the nomads and the settled life in the city, the circular flow of the wandering population reveals a tension and opens a third front or dimension of modernity.**

**AG** **This is the idea that there is a new mode of urbanization which I think is very unknown because we're only in the second generation of migrants. So the relationship they will sustain with the village is still unclear. But there certainly seems to be some suggestion that theirs is a circulatory mode of living. I think of that as really interesting. I'm really interested in that also from the perspective of how they are thought of as the 'floating population', the whole way of thinking about the city as more about water than solid matter. The ground of the city, especially a city like Shanghai, is actually very fluid so even though we know this is not right we tend to think of cities as stable and landlocked. You know, almost all global urbanization happens in delta regions, despite global warming. So on the one hand there is a kind of core narrative about the rising sea level, on the other hand there is a pretty clear migration pattern. Everyone's just going into the delta regions. Think about Shanghai's population. I used to think that 25 million was the figure, but apparently, it's more like 30, 25 million being the official figure. And of course, the area around Hong Kong is a similar kind of just crazed intense urbanization taking place around the rivers and the sea.**

**MB** **It's fascinating that the origins of civilization are found in sim-**

**ilar regions, the cradle of civilization: the first great cities in the delta regions of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Asia. Initially it of course had to do with trade and the fertility of the soil. Why is it still like that?**

**AG It is somewhat curious in the sense that there is the other really pretty strong core narrative about rising sea levels.**

**MB Humans are just drawn towards catastrophe.**

**AG Maybe that's part of it. But I think it is also just this sense that the future is more about that which can float. There's a tendency to seek higher land, to seek stronger foundations but there is also another tendency that drifts towards more fluid foundations. What happens when you know the ground is more fluid? As I said, to me it's interesting that internal migrants in China are known as a floating population. They themselves are not understood to be solid and tied to the ground of the city. In some way they are imagining a new kind of urban existence with more ties to water than to land. Maybe that's also something to think about with regards to these time questions. There is probably a whole bunch of stuff in there that needs unpacking but that has to do with the flows and currents of the rivers and the seas. So thinking about how water marks time is perhaps quite relevant.**

**MB In *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine* you quote Deleuze saying that with Kant 'time unrolls itself like a sort of serpent'. I think the quote works really well when juxtaposed with a description of traditional garden architecture from the Urbanatomy Shanghai guidebook: 'In most Chinese gardens, halls lead into pavilions that lead onto rockeries or lakes with no distinct end in sight. Not only does this help in the perpetual flight from evil spirits (trapped by their linear thinking) but also it creates an illusion of expanse.' It almost sounds like the time spiral is an evocation of evil spirits.**

**AG I haven't engaged with that Deleuze text in a really long time, but I do think it's amazing. Amy was talking about it the other day and about the revolving door as a way of thinking about time. There is also the picture on the cover of Kant's *Critique*, the Ouroboros [Fig. 6]. So Kant could have taken the serpent as a sort of profound image. I mean, Chinese gardens are very literally about guiding evil spirits. The zigzag bridge is about trying to deceive the evil spirits by going in zigzags. That's very cool in Feng Shui, too. There's a story that all the buildings in Hong Kong are influenced by Feng Shui, they're supposed to allow for the positives in these kinds of cosmic cycles, they are built to block negative energies and allow for the passages of certain unseen forces.**

**MB Central to *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine* is the idea that the ultimate capitalist product is time. The historical development**

Fig. 6. Kant and the Ouroboros.

**from what is produced by time and in the flux and changes of time to the production of time itself is at the heart of capitalism, as you see it, and not the monetary system as is commonly assumed.**

**AG Again, I'm just going to talk about what I'm working on currently. I'm teaching a course on media theory and yesterday one of the students screened a film called 'All that is Solid Melts into Data'. It was about data centres and low-latency or high-frequency trading. Part of it was about a data centre in New Jersey which is just across the street, across the river, from the Nasdaq. This particular data centre is so close to, is in such geographic proximity to the trading floor, and the firm has started doing something quite interesting, I think, which has to do with their proximity to the traders on the floor. This closeness gives them an advantage over any other trades that are taking place elsewhere. All of this occurs in machinic time, this imperceptible machinic time. You know, there's this whole mode of wealth creation and capital speculation that's built on the basis of the time lag between traders on the floor and other data warehouses. I haven't really thought about this in a while but I think my suspicion is, and that was also prominent in *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine*, that the economist Böhm-Bawerk is a key figure here for an understanding of how this works. The time lag is the essential capitalist machinery in Böhm-Bawerk analysis of capitalism, his critique of Marxism is based on this. It was something Marx didn't understand sufficiently.**

**MB A common anti-capitalist thought would be that you have to destroy the monetary system but the implication in *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine* is more that the monetary system isn't that important. The important thing about capitalism is the production of time. So the anti-capitalist, anti-monetary criticism of capitalism is based on an insufficient description of capitalism. People who want to fundamentally criticize capitalism have to address the production of time itself.**

**AG I definitely do not have a program for changing anything. I think that capitalism is so powerful because it operates on the level of this transcendental production of time. I would say techno-capitalism. I would like to make sure you have emphasized the technological aspect of it. That's the machinery that is the most core, this techno-capitalist production of time.**

**MB I'm only asking because the usual anti-monetary criticism of capitalism, from this perspective, misunderstands what capitalism is about.**

**AG Because it doesn't go deep enough. But I think there are a bunch of ideas colliding here. I'm not sure if you start with this idea that there is this techno-capitalist production of time and the fundamental aspect**

**of that is this timeline of a linear progression. Then how does that relate to the notion of the spiral, and my interest in the informal? Insofar as I have any kind of politics, which I feel like I don't even want to have, it would be on that side of things and have more to do with these kinds of disruptions or openings. In the time lag, where is the opening for zones of experimentation? When you have the production of time lags, how does that get captured by certain things and how does that allow for zones of experimentation? A question like 'how do you overthrow capitalism' is just not my kind of question.**

**MB** **I know.**

**AG** **In my current project I'm also interested in timelines. I'm interested in thinking about electromagnetic waves. The wave project is coming out of that. But it also has to do with timelines. It has to do with communication lines, communication occurring through these technosystems such as wireless technology. I think it's interesting to think about because the Böhm-Bawerk thing is to say: You have a house and you want some water. What the capitalist figures out is that it works to your advantage to take some time to build a pipe to your house to make the water run rather than just going every day to fetch the water. And that time lag is the investment, the time used for making the pipe for getting the water is where the capitalist machinery is. How does that relate to finance capitalism and the contemporary technology that's about trying to minimize that lag, to almost make that lag disappear? Obviously, that's far beyond human cognitive capacity.**

**MB** **But the outcome of that kind of investment has increased.**

**AG** **Totally. But the time lag itself has been reduced. We can't even perceive it anymore. Everything is bound up with it, everything from the entire capitalist financial system to Einsteinian physics is bound up with that time lag.**

**MB** **There is a lot of religious history in both *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine* and *Shanghai Future*, in particular on apocalyptic thinking in religion. But in regard to Chinese history, there is also your note that Mao Zedong was influenced by the tradition of 'sudden awakening' in Chan philosophy when he rejected the Marxist theory of gradual progress, of the stages of dialectical history. I haven't really thought about Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution in that way. It's a quite interesting perspective, how much religion and religious history is sort of interlocked with political decisions, because you spent much more time on the history of calendars and explaining the effect of calendrical thinking on politics.**

**AG** **And calendars are obviously religious, too. I think it is difficult,**

**this question about whether you call something religion or politics, in particular in this part of the world. There's supposed to have been some sort of historical moment when that break was clearly felt. I guess that is bound to the origin of philosophy. But the idea of some sort of difference doesn't really exist here. The term religion doesn't even really exist, or philosophy. Those are some of the modern concepts that are brought in. So I would certainly say that Mao could be read as being someone that was engaged in the religious tradition.**

# THE CITY AS ENTITY

**MB** **I only arrived in Shanghai yesterday. So I haven't had time to discover Shanghai on my own terms and bring my own thoughts on the city into the conversation. I've also kind of avoided it till now, but if I'm to say a few things about my approach to your work, both Anna's work on time spirals and Nick's work in general, I might as well do it now.**

**First of all, I'm interested in the legacy of Ccru and in turning what could be called the Landian orientation towards the future upside-down and using the conceptual machinery from Ccru and your writings on the prehistoric past. In some sense this was already done in Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia*, which is of course very impressive on its own, but from an archaeological perspective I think there are certain minor flaws in it, especially when the concept of hidden writing is applied to archaeology. I think it's better to think about archaeological objects as figural forces.**

**Nick Land** **Is this a sort of Foucauldian move you're making?**

**MB** **Mostly as a critique of Foucault's debasement of the term archaeology and the work of archaeologists. No, it's much closer to Lyotard's work on the figural. The way I see it is that archaeology is always a destruction of any attempt to make a reading, and it's that destruction you have to understand.**

**NL** **And you're connecting that to xenopoetics?**

**MB** Well, for instance Amy's 3D poems are obviously no longer primarily interested in poetry as text. It's poetry as a material form exhibiting a force on its own, a force of resistance to the primacy of scriptural logic. My challenge to her is to say that literature, at least modern literature in its most advanced form, has its roots in a time before the invention of writing, that modern literature is actually an archaeological object from a time that has only recently disclosed itself. In prehistorical archaeology you find a lot of visual or figurative objects that it seems wrong to interpret as signs or even symbols or related terms. Rather they are material objects in which the forcefulness of the figural is brought to reflect on itself. And as modern poetry tends towards the speechless, towards the obliteration of its status as writing or a movement beyond the limits of writing, I think there's a case to be made that literature is just a variation of, or deviation from, the prehistoric manipulation of figural forces. To some extent xenopoetics, as a culmination of that tendency, proves my point.

**NL** Do you think she agrees with that?

**MB** Well, we'll have to see. Secondly, regarding your writings, I think it would be interesting to start from your travel writings, just bear in mind that by travel writings I mean most of your writings from China. One reason to start with these writings is that a general motive, or motivation, in your writings seems to have been the ultimate modern attitude: voyages into the unknown to find the new. Obviously, your work can be divided into different phases, each with its own fields of interest, lately politics and finance, crypto-currency. Still, every phase unfolds as a voyage into unknown territory. Another reason is that it seems to have been a general method for you to write from under the skin of whatever has caught your attention and interest. There was a time when you wrote from under the skin of Bataille and Kant, sort of like a parasite feeding off their flesh. And a time when you wrote from inside silicon chips and the codes of computer viruses. I think one could argue, too, that the NRx writings to some extent are written from under the skin of Mencius Moldbug. Rather than being written from the bemused point of view of a foreigner in foreign lands, the travel writings, even all the texts that aren't literally about travelling, are sort of written from under the skin of China, or from under the skin of Shanghai as some kind of sentient being on its own. What this means is that the chosen skin in a particular period or in a particular phase of your writing is also what accounts for the differences in style, vocabulary and references. But there still seems to be a consistent thought behind it all. In the Bataille book you already write about capitalism as a tendency rather than a total system. And you write on the failure of left-wing thinking to offer a consistent critique and viable alternative on that ground: at its most basic level left-wing thinking doesn't understand capitalism, and because it doesn't understand that capitalism has no substantial socio-cultural

consistency there's an illusionary aspect to left-wing critique.

**NL** It all seems plausible. I obviously haven't thought about it in these terms but there's nothing that you're saying that sounds off beat.

**MB** The third point would be that if it's all about voyages into the unknown, to be very reductive, then travel writing is the contested model for all of your writings. When one looks at the actual travel writings, one would expect a lot of challenges for your own writing because travel writing is often based on subjective experience and biography.

**AG** I was just thinking as you were talking about *Erewhon*, the Samuel Butler book, as a kind of travel writing. I don't know if it's productive as a piece of travel writing but that's what it is. So there's a relationship there, perhaps, in that tradition.

**NL** I can't remember what we did in terms of labels but at some point there was definitely the idea of a time traveller's guide to Shanghai. I don't know whether we used that as a subtitle. It's interesting because obviously it's all very constrained institutionally. I mean I was just working for a magazine company. They wanted to do a guidebook. I thought this seemed like an interesting project. But it's all within that framework of delivering something within a kind of awkward institutional context … It's not that I'm disagreeing with anything that you're saying. But it's not really orchestrated at the level of subjective motivation except very partially. It's more that you're being projected into a certain path by these very processes. It all seemed just very quotidian.

**AG** At some level, Shanghai, as some big cities do, just captured both of our attention for quite a while. For a while it was like that was all there was to think about and explore, because the city itself is so engaging.

**NL** In Mikkel's terms, or alongside those terms, there is this question: What are you exploring when you're exploring the city? I think there was an attempt to displace that question a little bit. You're exploring time, you're exploring the nature of some kind of emergent individuated process, you're exploring this kind of abstract identity. The actual way you're heading on this path is not necessarily where you would expect to be going.

**AG** I imagine this is connected to this archaeology question about the city as an entity.

**MB** Yes, what you would want to do in archaeology is to understand past societies, sometimes constricted to a single village and at other times covering a large geographical area, as past intelligent machinery or emerging forms of past intelligence, rather than the more myopic focus

**on the life of the individual person of the past or artefacts that come to symbolize a specific archaeological period.**

**NL** **I would say that our project is massively about the individual, but it is the individual as the city.**

**MB** **As I said, I expected travel writing to pose a challenge to you in terms of previous attempts to move beyond the subjective. However, when I read the Urbanatomy guidebook to Shanghai, I could see that the solution here was the same as it has always been: to engage a collective of different writers. Rather than a book written from a personal, individual perspective, it's the work of a community where the individual traits of different writers tend to fade away as a collective intelligence emerges.**

**NL** **Obviously I would say that any success on it is obviously very partial and broken in most respects. But the attempt was definitely to let the city speak, to define Shanghai in that way by trying to get its – I don't really like to say 'its voice', so I'm struggling to find the best way to say it – but to communicate it and to put the reader in communication with the city.**

**MB** **I initially had the impression that there had been a curious omission of the past in your writings. But the importance of the past has actually been stressed for the last ten years or so. Even though there's still an orientation towards the future, there's the time spiral which sort of harvests from the past and there is also a direct use of archaeology in some of the actual travel writings, and in general there are other examples where the historical past is the basis for an orientation towards the future in a way it wasn't in your earlier work. I came to think of the time spiral as a culmination of different kinds of time models, both in your own work and the Ccru work.**

**NL** **To answer this question about the specific modes of organization in Chinese cities and its difference to other big cities around the world, let's just take Shenzhen and Shanghai. We couldn't have done anything like this, either what we did in the guidebook or either of our subsequent writings on Shanghai, on another journey. There's nothing really clearly provoking that same tempo and making us write in a very different way. Because of the fact that high modernism, which is its tradition, is already weirdly in communication with the Shanghai of today, it pulls you into that dynamic really strongly.**

**AG** **The whole time spiral idea and this thing about allowing the city to voice itself, as soon you start engaging with the city you can't get away from that. It just performs that over and over again.**

**NL** **Its hypermodernism and its nostalgia are completely the same.**

**MB** **So the time spiral couldn't have been developed anywhere else?**

**NL** **It's complicated, because obviously there was a spiral thing in the Ccru, too. I think Shanghai reprocessed it and concretized it and took it to where it has subsequently gone.**

**AG** **I think there was an abstract interest in the spiral, which is kind of obvious, and then you see a place just manifesting it, trying to manifest it, so concretely.**

**NL** **We arrived early in the new millennium, so the opening of the city had already been going on for just under a decade. So it wasn't that we got there right at the start. But what was absolutely vividly striking was that the hypermodernist dynamic and mentality was massively about going back. It was like it was returning to the city of the future. Everywhere in the sort of places that are celebrating the new city, like the Urban Development Museum, is just this incredible celebration of the high modernist epoch in Shanghai which was really just cut short by war and revolution and all of these things and put into the deep freeze. It is not that there was any sort of reflexive gap or mediation. It's just that it went straight for the process of just reopening, and this kind of progressive dynamic was immediately also this regressive, recollective reanimation of what was the past. There is, of course, an urban memory that goes back before the 1920s and 30s, but that period is somehow in some real sense the centre of gravity of the urban past. There's nothing like the same drive for people to push the past back beyond that, into the Opium Wars or some time before that. The city's past is just that crazed source of development where the city of Shanghai was locally famous as this sort of avatar of the future.**

# TIME–SENSITIVITY

**MB** **Urban Future promoted the idea that postmodernism in philosophy and literature studies was actually just ideas from economics, especially the idea of a postponement of meaning, for instance …**

**NL** **Obviously that's expressed massively reductively. If I were subject to a sufficiently intense attack I would probably have to manoeuvre a little bit. I'm afraid I can't really help to see this other than as it's looking from my bitcoin work at the moment. But I do think there's a very mainstream teleology that bitcoin is radically disrupting, and that teleology is to do with the complexities of structures of debt. It is very tied up with the whole Kantian revolution, macroeconomics, the new sense of government and the academic expert in the economy and the control of the money supply as being a political objective, and through control of the money supply, control of mass economic psychology. So that complex, which has just come to seem so normal to people that it just escapes question, I think is deeply isomorphic with what people call postmodernism. To say that postmodernism as a cultural commons introduces ideas from economics, I could see people quite reasonably arguing with that particular way of formulating it. But I would retreat no further than saying that it's a consistent socio-cultural complex that has to be seen in a kind of integrated fashion.**

**MB** **Then, to talk about someone who has been enormouly present in your own work, how do you see Deleuze? Is he part of postmodernism or is he out of it and trying to face that economic complex as well?**

**NL** **Deleuze is a really cryptic figure. He's playing a lot of interesting strategic games. But I don't think he is really a postmodernist in this sense. He has a critique of the model of debt as the basic form of socio-economic articulation. He uses Nietzsche to do that. It's a very interesting tradition, the whole *Genealogy of Morals*, where Nietzsche talks about creating an animal that's entitled to make promises. It's such a contemporary concern, and it's so important in Deleuze's reading of where we are and who we are and what happened in the second half of the 20th century. And I think the difference between for instance Derrida and Deleuze is absolutely huge in this respect. Derrida embraces the postmodern condition in a way that I don't think Deleuze is doing at all.**

**MB** **I don't know if you're familiar with the American poet Charles Olson. In the 1950s, some twenty years before Lyotard's work on the postmodern condition, Olson defined in some slightly different, rather crude terms what he saw as a development into postmodernism in literature and art. To him the difference between a modernist attitude and a postmodern attitude is that the modernist feels alienated from the past and therefore sets out to create from a clean slate, whereas there is no experience of alienation in the postmodern encounter with the past. Instead there's a whole plethora of other experiences, including an experience of debt to the past no matter the distance from it. Consequently, the postmodernist has to work from a much more complicated, mixed and confused state. Do you think that distinction would put neomodernity and the time spiral on a slide backwards into, at least, Charles Olson's definition of postmodernity?**

**NL** **It's interesting. I wonder how you can square that definition with more recent articulations of postmodernity. I was working with some colleagues a long time ago, twenty years ago or even more, on a book that was to be called *Machinic Postmodernism*. I'm not dogmatic about maintaining postmodernism's critical practice, I think the tactics are relatively clear but its deepest strategic orientation of how it is operating is relatively counterproductive. It obviously connects with the question of time lag and simultaneity. Time lag is in a sense a very postmodern thing, the différance is almost a formulation of a time lag, isn't it? So if the annihilation of debt, which is a Deleuzian theme, a Nietzschean theme and a bitcoin theme, is your guide, then those things are radically distinct from the basic parts of postmodernism as a socio-economic or cultural phenomenon which is to do basically with the elaboration of credit structures. There is a sort of quite explicit attempt to say that derivatives trading is this kind of limit for philosophical possibility in a way that is very, I think, postmodern actually because this**

elaboration of credit structures is really the postmodern attitude.

**MB** Do you want to talk more specifically about your bitcoin writing?

**NL** I think we should just see if it imposes itself. You know, the biographical illusion is that people have a relation to their work that is simultaneous. Like in the case of Reza. Reza could in various ways say things now that would be extremely interesting in relation to The *Cyclonopedia*, but what he could not do is speak now in some simple way as the author. And that's a general phenomenon.

**MB** This thing about the biographical illusion is intriguing if you think about modernity in terms of narratives. The narrative of modernity is quite linear, but the narrative of modernist literature usually isn't. There's a productive conflict or tension there. I wonder what is the proper narrative structure of neomodernity or the time spiral? In the Chinese state identity there must be some explicit narrative connected with the modernization …

**NL** I think that question is fantastically interesting but it's also very multiple, there's a lot of different sub-questions in it. One of them is what's the relationship between the Chinese state narrative and the actual prevailing social, cultural narratives in China. I think the relation is complicated.

There's a long tradition in China of deferring to the central imperial narrative but in a way that leaves a lot of space, and the implicit social deal is all based on that space. There's the very famous saying: The mountains are high, and the emperor is far away. Wherever you go here it's generally shocking for Westerners how non-antagonistic the overwhelming mass of China's population is. But within that non-antagonism is also tacitly the point where what you're deferring to, what you're respecting is very strictly delimited. It has its function. Social stability and all of these things require this kind of attitude of non-rebellion. But the mountains are high, and the emperor is far away.

Then there is this whole other, perhaps warmer and certainly more important sphere and certainty that is enabled by the fact that the differences are very ritualistic and formulaic and constrained in its depth. I think it's very confusing for Westerners. The Western side of it is of course also very interesting and complicated. Because there's an ideal of tight unity of public pronouncement and private interest. It's very natural in Western people to still want to say that insofar there is a kind of capitalist dynamic in the West, it should be strongly reflected in some kind of public and capitalist pronouncement. Western people love these notions like neoliberalism which is the tight identity between what is being politically stated and the actual social process in motion. I think there's a really big break from that here. It's reflected in this confusion about China, is it socialist, is it capitalist? You can't solve that riddle in

these idealized Western terms of there being some unity of public statement and social process.

It's not as if it's purely hypocritical but I do think that all the government's pronouncements have this ritualistic aspect. They expect to be respected on a certain level, but they don't expect it to saturate work and social production. They will say something knowing full well that it will be socially referenced only as this kind of liturgy.

This whole thing is getting back to the question about the government's statement. The government has a rhetoric about the future to a degree that is mostly taken from and slightly updated and schematized from Marx. I think almost everyone will accept it as just the liturgical content of this dynasty. The CCP, the new China dynasty, has a certain set of ritualistic commitments, and everyone will nod to those commitments, because they don't want to overthrow the dynasty. But I don't think that in doing so they are saying in any profound way that this is the narrative that is actually guiding us. It's rather that the path we're following requires a relationship to this narrative, but it's not captured by that.

**MB** What kind of narrative would be reflective of the times or the state of the world?

**NL** I definitely think that time anomaly in some form is intrinsic to the neomodern attitude. My immediate response to your question is to go back to what we've been talking about in terms of Shanghai which is very singular, and the movie *Looper* which I sort of did my own book *Shanghai Times* around. It's very helpful. Again, it's complicated, because it's all tied up with the concrete process of the relationship of Hollywood to China, too. The movie includes all these Chinese elements, it wants to have a Chinese audience. But I think it does that by searching for a plane that does really work. The weird time scramble you get in that way where the luminous skyline is a picture of the future is actually very in tune with the sort of narrative structures that work here.

**MB** Because a narrative structure is always a kind of a direction to follow.

**NL** The fact that a certain dynamic of regression is intrinsic to the most intense kind of futuralization is, I think, the neomodern insight which is captured with extraordinary intensity here. Because there's a sense that the Shanghai of high modernism was already inhabiting our present. That's why we reciprocally tilt into futuralization now and in doing so dramatically find ourselves back on a plane that we share with the past. In terms of your interest in not a reading of the past but a communication with the past, that's the concrete form that it takes. It's not that the past becomes intelligible, but it becomes your flat plane of communication with the past at the exact point when you seem to be tilting away from it. I mean, what was Art Deco about? I don't think you

**can answer that historiographically, you answer that by the fact that at a certain forward-tilted plane where you are now you find yourself at a plane where Art Deco is talking to you.**

**MB** **I would like to return to the biographical illusion and the question of narrative. You have a very stated dislike of biography when it comes to philosophy, and I think that many of the projects you've been involved with have been about escaping biography and the focus on one individual person, probably because that focus has a very rigid narrative written into it. But perhaps there is a possibility of letting life story and narrative meet in alternative ways and develop into another kind of biography?**

**NL** **I can see that, but I think it would always actually explode the biography. I just have this absolutely solid commitment to the fact that the biographical narrative is illusionary. It just seems clear to me that that's the case. The real agent never finds its own explanandum of anything that happens in the self-reflexive individual. The self-reflexive individual is the puppet of various things. It's a good narrative device for exploring certain things. But the point that you actually have some genuinely revelatory moment is always against or beyond or outside.**

**MB** **I was actually thinking about the intertwining of biography and mythology. Biography often turns into mythology in its narrative mode. Still, I think a very accurate autobiography based on the lacunae in mythological narrative could be useful as an attempt at demythologization, though it would probably end up being very dull reading. The projects you've been involved with obviously attempted something different. I thought about them as attempts to move away from the intertwining of biography and mythology – or mythomania – qua the evasion of biography. And still there is this tendency, in other people's texts, to mythologize the years at Warwick university and the Ccru. I don't know if it's interesting or fascinating in itself, but there's definitely some tension worth exploring in the tendency to turn all the escape attempts into myths.**

**NL** **It's not going to go away, those myths aren't going to expire. People love those stories. They confirm things they would like to think about themselves and their own agency and their own control over fate. And then there's a whole wider series of social commitments and they conform well to that. It would be unrealistic to think that they could simply be expelled.**

**MB** **One thing about the Ccru I find fascinating from a historical point of view is that the traditional cultural narrative about influence and importance is focused on individual persons breaking into the current state of the world at specific points in time. Sartre, for instance,**

and later Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard can all be said to mark both a break in time and a breakthrough for a new direction of thinking at a specific point in time, in general occasioned by a major publication. Bataille, Blanchot and a few other people from a slightly older generation of writers, on the other hand, are more like hidden geographical features that direct the flow of time and thought and continue to influence several later generations. They were present as forces of influence and contestation for most of the second half of the 20th century, to some extent even before World War II, from the weakening of surrealism in the 1930s and Sartre's first success to way beyond the heyday of poststructuralism, but mostly as hidden forces, mostly in obscurity. I suspect something similar is the case with the Ccru: the Chapman brothers, Kode9 and Hyperdub, Mark Fisher and a few others all seem to have made their mark as parts of a specific era of British culture in another way than Ccru. They've all acknowledged the importance of the Ccru, but the Ccru itself is still more like the hidden forces or geographical features that though unseen direct the flow of time.

**NL** I think it's interesting to what degree those perceptions are themselves time-sensitive. One of the really interesting things about talking to Amy is that I can see the coalescence of social phenomena that are very analogous. There are collective projects taking place that are very intense in the way that they're fused onto the sort of technological and media possibilities of the time, very intensively, and they are obviously in their own sort of space of reflection and utterly disruptive of this notion of the biographical importance to the point that it would become comical in those spaces to think that you can cast off those micro-social processes into the actions of discrete, isolated or individual agents. They are still in obscurity. We've been across this horrid desert of the Facebook era in which everything has relapsed badly into this kind of blazonry of what's happening. As a new generation disrupts that, maybe those stories will just become less and less. In a similar way you could say that looking back at this whole strange Acéphale social process around Bataille, the ability to grasp that in terms that isn't again just hard illusions is probably also dependent on the intensity of the social processes that are taking place in your own time. This thing with the Ccru, I don't think anyone involved in it knows what it was, but given some of the things that came out of it, it just seems to me like it has a certain kind of timelessness. I say that in particular because of the numogram. I think the numogram is something that passed through us and is a vast structure of time that dwarfs the sort of perceptions that might be taking place.

**MB** Would you care to define the numogram?

**NL** Well, I think it defines itself. Any description is a potential degeneration. To define it in words in a way that doesn't degenerate it is a

**huge challenge. I think there are sentences that it can spawn around it which are not defilements. That's possible. But the possibility of saying that in its diagrammatic form it requires some level of commentary, or even that the level of commentary could somehow be superior, is just simply wrong.**

**MB** **I guess one of the big ideas of the Ccru was that thinking is not commentary, it is to use all aspects of thought and culture, to attend to them and engage with them and in the process change not only yourself but also the nature of thought.**

**NL** **Yes, I mean, in the final five years before the whole Ccru just imploded, there was a very explicit sense that what we were doing was working the numogram, and with working I mean working in the sense that it is used in magical traditions. We were trying to find ways of just letting it be a guidance system.**

# DIFFERENT MASKS OF HUMANITY

**MB** **Did you see *Blade Runner 2049*?**

**NL** **Yes.**

**MB** **Okay, I will just quickly say that I was hugely disappointed by it. In terms of its narrative, it was very regular, it seemingly abstained from exposition, yet the characters still in no uncertain terms explicitly interpreted and explained events and psychological motives to each other, and most importantly the film had none of the moral ambiguity of the original *Blade Runner*. Having said that, I would like to link my impression of the future in the original *Blade Runner* with an engagement with the past.**

**To me *Blade Runner* is about autism, for instance, or Asperger's, something like that, people with a completely different experience of the world. Its question is: How do we find the courage not just to listen to someone whose opinions are different from our own, but to live with someone who has a completely different way of experiencing the world, experiencing society, experiencing social life, what place will we allow for such experiences inside organized society?**

**Regarding the past, one of the things that got me interested in how you actually relate to the past was something you wrote about the Terracotta Army. It was basically just a few private photographs from your visit to the site and a note stating that it was hard to not be impressed, even for someone like you. So what kind of impression did the site more specifically make, or rather why did such an, I would say, encounter with past intelligence make an impression, and what, in your**

**opinion, would then be the difference between how past intelligence disrupts our self-image, our conception of our self, and how a future artificial intelligence promises to challenge our understanding of ourselves? As you've said, the threat of AI is not killer robots, but the collapse of our conception of human uniqueness.**

**NL** **Let's just start with the new *Blade Runner* movie. I've dealt with that word, disappointment. But then I feel I'm not there yet. You want to somehow move beyond that. It had elements of greatness about it that added to the distress. The narrative was just terrible. But what I said to Amy about this was that it was almost like a mirror image in relation to the original *Blade Runner*, which starts off with assuming that there're some common presumptions about humanity and takes you on a path towards subverting them. And the final question that defines the movie is the question: How do you know who you are, how confident are you that you're actually human? Whereas in *Blade Runner 2049* the most impressive part about it is that it begins with the absolute terminus, a complete loss of assumed humanity. You have a replicant and his digital avatar girlfriend. Nowhere in this whole structure is there any reference to some common humanity. It's not humanity engaging with something alien. It's the alien engaging with the alien in different masks of humanity, self-consciously fake. That starting point has a comparable intensity to the destination of the previous movie, but the direction of the movie is away from that, back again to this very Christian humanistic myth about the miracle of the child. It is returning you to a restoration of some sacralized humanity. It's almost an epic disappointment in the sense that the movie is able to reflect the previous movie. It's not just a hideous abortion that fails to get even close to the previous one. It's got a structural integrity with it, but it uses that to completely reverse the path of the previous movie. I'm sure that's got to be historically interesting. Now how does this connect with these other parts of your question?**

**MB** **Now that we have this kind of regression into the Christian myth, what does it tell us about …**

**NL** **Where we are? I don't know. But I'm sure it tells us something, because I see this so commonly. On the left this increasingly explicit reanimation of Christianity is very strong. You see it in Badiou, you see it in Žižek, even Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies* ends up basically revalorizing a certain set of Christian values to set against what she sees as a deterioration into a sort of nihilistic, Nietzschean cultural attitude. Then on the right, I would particularly single out Peter Thiel's use of René Girard. I think Girard is really key in this respect. Not only is he very interesting, his work is one of the most ingenious lines for this Christian cultural restoration. But then Peter Thiel converts it into economics. His book *Zero to One* is a kind of paean to Girard and converts him into the language of economic competition and business strategy**

**and all of these great colloquial capitalist registers. He does it with an incredible competence. So there's a full spectrum. The process of Christian reanimation happening, I think, has a lot to do with the fact that the world is becoming multipolar. People are seeing that as a specific Western and cultural legacy rather than, as it had to become, becoming increasingly transparent and invisible, as some kind of accepted global culture, thinned out and decomposed and concretized enough to pretend to be a new world order of uncontroversial human rights and globalized faculties. That project has collapsed, that project of a sublimated global anaemic Christianity has died. And because it has died, I think there's this restoration of a much more uncamouflaged culturally assertive Christianity. It's coming from all different parts of the political spectrum.**

**MB** **Then the part about having the courage to live with people with fundamentally different modes of experience and the encounter with past intelligence. What was so intriguing about the Terracotta Army?**

**NL** **You see, that emperor, Qin Shi Huang, who as you know was the first emperor of China, is particularly notorious. Have you seen Zhang Yimou's movie *Hero*? It's the morale of totalitarian rule. It's called Asiatic despotism for a reason, no historical Western society comes close to that, executing all the scholars, burning all the books, and unifying the country through this process of absolutely brutal statecraft. In *Hero* you can see this weird ambivalence to that. There's no leader, people know he's a monster, and he's also the template for Mao Zedong. So you can't talk about him without it being also a kind of subterranean discussion of Mao Zedong. It would be neat if you could simply define it, the sheer – I don't know what of it, because I don't think 'impressiveness' translates into anything explanatory. In a way this connects to your question about how these aliens live among us, about autism. It echoes something Anna wants us to work on together, which is to do with sinophobia and technophobia. If you look at the canon of sinophobic tropes, they're very comparable to technophobic or robophobic tropes. One of the themes that come up is people who have a lack of ethical comprehension, who are somehow different to us. We presumably don't share the same values in some subtle way. It's not just some model of modern savagery, it's just this model of difference. The Chinese work too hard, they're copying stuff, they don't complain … It's basically an anticipatory structure of the fear of an automatized robotic future. It's a competition, and this form of intense competition is intolerable. Somehow it's being said that the Chinese are not human in the way that we're used to. They will live under conditions that we will never dream of. They will work harder than we will ever dream of working. We're being subject to a form of economic competition that is not acceptable because it is not recognizable. I think this whole complex of racism and fear of the future is really interesting. Now in the contemporary world those**

**things have massively come together. I think that's why there is this sino-future fear. Because obviously the technological industries and this set of Chinese cultural traits have been machinicly fused. The techno-industry at its heart now has this Chinese element. That's just to say that I think what you're saying about *Blade Runner*, what the movie is about, is also very closely related to this. The West is going to endure a lot of psychological stress, and this kind of stuff is going to be a big part of it.**

**MB** **Returning to the example of the Terracotta Army, perhaps the difference between how the idea of a future AI is unsettling our self-image, and how the past can unsettle it in a comparable but still distinctive way, is that in the encounter with a past intelligence there will always be the human framework. The past can disclose the radically human, it can display how radically different and diverse human experience and intelligence can be, to the point of being unrecognizable. Whereas the radicality of the future AI …**

**NL** **Is completely unrelated, yes. That's why it's really good, this circuit we're on here and this whole thing to do with Qin Shi Huang and the android. Because part of it is this sense of being utterly alien. It's simply unimaginable, it's beyond the notion of human possibility that this kind of regime could exist. There has to be a certain intensity of sinophobic racism that actually takes you into the same zone that you get to on this other futuristic path to do with automation, where there is a complete collapse of a sense of common human identity and an encounter – whether psychotic or realistic doesn't matter – with this sense of this other utterly unfamiliar culture that just breaks your conception of human community.**

**MB** **Some people will say that the path towards automation also has devastating effects on the actual living human population and critically point out three, as they see them, defects of both left and right accelerationism: the failure to question the limits of capitalistic production, the failure to recognize that an intentional creation or construction of economic crisis is an inherent part of the capitalist machinery, and the failure to question the contrast between the promise of technological emancipation and the lived reality of people subjected to accelerated technological developments.**

**NL** **We can obviously take that step by step. I think it's difficult, I can see why it's tempting, but I think the structures of left and right acceleration are so different that it's very difficult to find a common critical platform that will cut through them both.**

**MB** **What do you make of the claim that you wilfully ignore the difference between historical and contemporary consequences, and the**

**sheer potential of technological emancipation?**

**NL** **It's difficult. Already in Deleuze and the Ccru, the thing we were definitely holding on to was the reality of the virtual. So a distinction between potentials and actuality seems very philosophically problematic. The tendency of capitalism is to intensify virtualities by introducing these marketable virtual economic objects that are amphibious between potential and actuality. When you buy a piece of a company, what are you buying? A piece of actuality or a piece of virtuality? Neither straightforwardly. It's only if you're literally just going to liquidate the thing and sell it that the next day you're dealing purely with actuality. Whereas the virtuality that you're buying into is anchored in the fact that it has to actually be a realistically plausible corporate process of development. While I don't want to refuse what's going on behind that question, I don't think it's a well-formulated objection as it stands.**

**And this point about crisis production isn't really interesting to us. Crisis has become a bit soft since the 1930s which was a sort of hard crisis. I think capitalism is fine with crisis and maybe even addicted to crisis. It's when society's too comfortable that it really deteriorates badly. The Chinese example and the police state example in general, as in East Germany, are the same. You go through a social process that actually exposes the outer limits of collectivization. You literally murder the bourgeoisie. You couldn't have a more extreme crisis of capitalism. And what comes out of it is a form of enhanced turbo capitalism that has never been seen before on Earth. The Chinese growth rate since the Cultural Revolution and Deng Xiaoping has been beyond anything anyone has ever seen.**

**The notion of a crisis of capitalism is again complex. To say that a crisis of capitalism is somehow getting closer to killing capitalism seems to be a lead without any historical evidence. The more extreme the process of social insurgence against capitalism, the more radical the capitalism you end up with in the wake of that. Vietnam is another recent example. When people are polled on these questions that are meant to just engage popular libidinal investments, you know, do you think that market economy is the best way to organize society, Vietnam has the most positive response to that in the world. It just leaves all Western anxieties in the dust.**

**MB** **Anna and I were talking about the production of time as the most important aspect of capitalism, far more important than the monetary system, and how criticism of the evils of the monetary system is misdirected, that yours and Anna's work goes for a deeper understanding of capitalism …**

**NL** **It would be complacent from my side of things to claim I have a better understanding of capitalism than left-wing critics. But I do think there's a really crucial relationship between capitalism as a social pro-**

cess and the formal philosophical structures of the Kantian critical philosophy. Both of them betray anyone who wants to set a limit. The quintessence of what the transcendental philosophy says is that time is not an object. So every objectification of time is going to be subverted, it's going to have missed its actual target and therefore in some way fail. It will be metaphysically flawed. That's what happens with the critique of capitalism. It is always tempted to engage in premature objectification and say this is what capitalism is, we can tell, we can define it as an object and then by doing it we can set limits to it. That objectification process always has the same metaphysical congenital defect. You can argue with it, which obviously I do, but that's less interesting than the fact that as time passes it will be exposed for its inadequacies. The left that bases itself on this model of objectification of capitalism will be defeated and outwitted and mocked by the actual historical process. That's obviously what the history of the left is, the successive attempts to upgrade the objectification of capital and then a bit later revaluate it because capitalism over-spilt in all directions and developed in directions the left didn't foresee. There is symmetry there, because I think it's a mistake on the right, too, to have a model of capitalism. You should see that as a joke. Capitalism is a transcendental process.

**MB** If I remember your video lecture on the blockchain and time correctly, and understood it correctly, the basic claim of the lecture was that Kant's model of time was proven right by the blockchain, while Einstein's model of time was proven wrong. According to Einstein's model you cannot synchronize different points in space, but according to you the blockchain effectively does exactly that, it synchronizes different points in space.

**NL** Again, you have to be careful. It would be ridiculous to just say that Einsteinian physics has been disproved. But the point is that the blockchain is designed to solve the double spending problem, where I've got a unit of cryptocurrency and I give it to you and I also give it to someone else, and therefore both of you are cheated and it's not working as money. That's the model of the problem the blockchain is designed to solve. That problem is isomorphic with general relativity, which is to say for one person this happens before that, and for another person this happens after that. It's exactly the same. The non-simultaneity or the lack of absolute succession in Einsteinian space-time is having an insoluble double-spending problem. So if that were the case, if that's where we were, then bitcoin would not be bitcoin, it would not be a cryptocurrency. So it does in a certain sense solve the problem of general relativity.

There's a very interesting exchange in the development stage between Jim Donald and Satoshi Nakamoto about precisely this problem. They call it the Byzantine Generals Problem. It's a game theoretical model that the blockchain is trying to solve. The scenario is that you got a whole bunch of generals waiting to attack a city. They are trying

to communicate with themselves to coordinate their attack, but there are some communications between them that are corrupted, and they don't know which ones. In attempting to communicate with each other they could receive false, deliberately misleading information in order to sabotage their plan. That scenario is a way of describing this problem with synchronization. The Einsteinian space-time model says that you can't solve the Byzantine Generals Problem. It's a mistake. But the bitcoin idea is if you have this proof of work system which is based on quantizing time by a large scale, like a 10-minute block, and across that unit of time, if that's an indivisible unit of time, a block which has no internal generation, then you can synchronize within a block, you can synchronize across the block, and you sort of solve the space-time problem. Now in a way you just got around it. If you were trying to have an interplanetary blockchain you would need to keep expanding your block process and its duration. An interstellar blockchain would be ridiculous. You would need like an 8-year block size. It couldn't conceivably happen.

So it's not that it's disputing Einsteinian physics. But it's finding a technological fix for the problem of general relativity and it does so, to go back to your earlier thing about the production of time, by creating synthetic time. This is the first real vivid example of what it is for capitalism to produce artificial time.

**MB** I can't help but think of the blockchain, of the formal structure of the blockchain, as a great anti-poem, a counter-example to the tradition of verse in poetry. There's a tendency to understand poetry as related to time, because the verse or line breaks critically change the meaning of certain words when you move from one line to the next. The sense of poetry is supposed to be this change of meaning, the fluctuation of meaning in time. So if there's a specific production of a flexible or fluctuating artificial time in poetry, it's completely different from the production of time in the blockchain. Just an observation. I guess all this stuff about the blockchain is related to your book on bitcoin which has been underway for quite some time. It seems to be a massive project and one of great importance to you.

**NL** Well, it's in a state now where it's very close to being finished, but I don't know how easy it is to summarize. I mean, the conversation we just had is one aspect which I think is quite essential to it. It's basically an attempt to produce a translation protocol between the critical philosophy and the bitcoin protocol. I think in doing that the sense of what both of them are is modified. You can see it as a book about Kantianism as much as a book about the blockchain and how capitalism and modernity are almost equal or interchangeable terms. It's hard to have a panoramic focus on it now while I'm working on it.

**MB** You wrote a very short sort of endorsement in reverse of David

Golumbia's book *The Politics of Bitcoin: Software as Right-Wing Extremism*, more or less in the line of saying that it was very good as a diagnosis, but wrong in every aspect of its negative evaluations. The points criticized ought rather to be seen as positive.

**NL** I think the subtitle is beautiful, I love that.

**MB** I thought your own book on bitcoin would be more political, dealing with bitcoin in terms of social change and political change.

**NL** I tried to be just cold and not say this is good and this is bad. As far as I'm interested in what's happening, what can or could not realistically be stopped, why do certain people want certain things to happen or not, I tried to be on that level as disengaged as possible. I guess I'm more critical of the left than the right. Maybe I don't talk about the right as much unless the bitcoin people themselves are included on the right. But it seems to me that the theoretical assumptions that have been made on the left are just not very good. I mainly talk about David Graeber and his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. I found him useful because he distils certain notions about money as credit and sees it as the essence of the capitalist system. So bitcoin should be a problem for him, because there is no credit in the bitcoin system. There is a certain convergence between Graeber and the Austrian School of Economics in the sense that money as a positive aspect is associated with liberalism, but better or worse depending on which side you're coming from. I do think that Golumbia's book is interesting. I like to see this sparkling conflict and cultural disintegration.

**MB** About the idea of coldness. In the 1990s there was the project of writing from an inhuman point of view. I think that it's very hard to reach a level where it is not conceived or experienced as human coldness, I mean in their anger and aggression many of the writings from the '90s still felt angry and aggressive in a recognizable human way.

**NL** I would definitely say that's a mark of failure.

**MB** One impression from my first week in China was the experience of disinterest in the same way that you can experience nature as disinterested. Natural life goes on without really being disturbed or even paying attention to you, unless you get very close to whatever bird or animal is within reach. I felt something similar here. I do not mean it in any dismissive way, and it is not to compare Chinese people to a natural force or something like that. It was more the impression of what you call the gravity well of Chinese tradition and culture and history and the sheer scope of the country. There's so much gravity in all of that, a single Westerner doesn't make any impression or arouse any particular interest. As a traveller it felt like a kind of freedom, a free space to travel

**in, unburdened by the heavy gaze of other people. But, perhaps more interestingly, I also wondered if there is a connection here to your interest in a detached point of view, to be guided by coldness.**

**NL** **It sounds plausible. And I certainly like, as you said, the sort of anthropological distance. Some people are very hungry for community. That's not something that to me has been particular attractive.**

**MB** **This detached view I experienced is still a very human form of detachment. So if there's a certain sense of failure in the attempt to write from an inhuman point of view, or from a cold point of view, it might have less to do with failure than with the fact that the true coldness of a machine or AI would be coldness in a form we can't imagine or even accomplish.**

**NL** **Sure. I think one of the great tasks of cinema in particular is to explore this area. The single thing I love most about Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*, which I think is one of the great movies, is that the coldness of Ava, the humanoid robot undergoing a Turing test, is, exactly as you say, camouflaged. It's only right at the end that you see that she strategically misleads.**

***Then one can retroactively speculate that the replicant Rachael from Blade Runner operates from a similar mindset, every expression of real love camouflaging quite different strategies.***